

# National Sharecroppers Week March 1st-7th

"The Voice of The Disinherited"

## SHARECROPPERS' VOICE

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE SOUTHERN TENANT FARMERS' UNION

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# "LAND TO THE LANDLESS!"

### BLACKSTONE FILES MINORITY REPORT IN ROOSEVELT'S TENANCY COMMITTEE

W. L. Blackstone, representative of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, has filed a minority report along with the majority report given to President Roosevelt by the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy. President Roosevelt added Blackstone to the committee when the STFU demanded that the sharecroppers be given a voice.

While the majority of the committee did not accept all the proposals made by Blackstone for the Union, it did recommend that civil liberties and the right to organize be guaranteed to tenant farmers.

#### Cases of Violence

"Within the last few years," said the majority report, "tenants, croppers and farm laborers have organized to increase their bargaining power. Members of these organizations assert that they have been frequently denied the rights of peaceful assembly guaranteed them by the Constitution. They assert further that they have been subjected to physical violence and that some have been forced to flee for their lives.

It continued, "The Committee strongly recommends that States guarantee to these groups to enforce the rights of peaceful assembly and of organization to achieve their legitimate objectives."

#### Special Bureau

Blackstone's report proposed that federal agencies to remedy farm tenancy conditions be placed under a separate post in the cabinet, instead of the Department of Agriculture which he described as "concerned primarily with the top third of the farmers in the country." He urged also that a special bureau of the Department of Labor be set up to handle landlord-tenant relations. Local administration of relief measures, he said, should be in the hands of persons sympathetic to the tenants, in contrast with the policy that has been followed in the past.

While agreeing with some of the proposals for rehabilitation, the sharecropper representative pointed out that the rehabilitation loan program was not enough to solve the problem of tenancy and recommended that cooperative farm activities be pushed.

"We believe," he said, "that in the cotton South the small homestead visioned in many of the present proposals is an economic anachronism, foredoomed to failure. We strongly dissent, therefore, from the 'small homestead' philosophy as the solution for the

majority of the Southern agricultural workers."

It became known that several members of the Committee had attempted to strike out the section calling for the protection of civil liberties and the right to organize. In a closed session of the Committee, Blackstone argued that the statement was far too weak and should be strengthened. He told his fellow-committeemen of his own experiences in Arkansas as an organizer for the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

"As those who have been beaten and terrorized—and some of us forced to flee for our lives—in our struggle to pull ourselves up out of our slough of misery," he told them, "we know that a few words from responsible Federal officials on behalf of our constitutional civil rights would have helped in our past battles and will help in the ones we know are yet to come."

#### Written Contracts

Among the proposals of the committee endorsed by Blackstone were recommendations for written contracts to safeguard against the "crooked pencil" of landlords, the payment of tenants for improvements on the land, the extension of liberal credit to sharecroppers and farm tenants, and the abolition of the use of scrip and high-priced commissary stores.

President Roosevelt has recommended to Congress that action be taken on the report of the Farm Tenancy Committee.

(The full text of Blackstone's minority report will be found on page 3.)

### CONVENTION RECORD

The stenographic record of the Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention is now available in printed form, together with the full text of the resolutions, messages of greeting, and National Secretary H. L. Mitchell's report to the convention. Since the National Secretary's report can be obtained in that form, the VOICE is discontinuing its serial publication.

The Ceremony of the Land, in a 16-page pamphlet form, may be obtained at five cents a copy.

Members of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union can obtain copies at 35 cents per copy, non-members at 50 cents, by communicating with the general offices, Box 5215, Memphis.

### WELCOME



Odie L. Sweeden, secretary of the Oklahoma Southern Tenant Farmers Union, who delivered the speech of welcome to convention delegates at Muskogee.

## Norman Thomas Opens National Croppers Week

Friends of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union have organized a National Sharecroppers Week, to be celebrated from March 1 to 7, it was officially

announced in a nation-wide radio broadcast by Norman Thomas on February 10. Howard Kester, member of the executive council of the STFU is treasurer of the sponsoring committee.



KESTER

Calling upon his audience "to see to it that a kind of agricultural exploitation of human beings, which makes life in parts of America worse than life in some peasant communities of Europe and Asia should at once be ended," he said: "Join with us in National Sharecroppers Week! Help support the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union!"

Mr. Thomas is the honorary chairman of the committee sponsoring the event. Sidney Hertzberg, of the Workers Defense League, is secretary, with offices at 112 East 19th Street, New York City.

National Sharecroppers Week is being sponsored by the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the Workers Defense League. Its purpose is to call attention to the

need for a fundamental solution to the problem of farm tenancy and to create nationwide support for the STFU in its struggle for better conditions.

Mass meetings are being arranged throughout the country to take place during the week, and moving picture films are being used to bring home the importance of helping the sharecroppers win their freedom.

### NEW OFFICERS

The following are the officers of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, elected by the Muskogee Convention:

J. R. Butler and E. B. McKinney were re-elected President and Vice-President. The national executive council re-appointed H. L. Mitchell as national secretary.

The members of the national executive council are:

J. A. "Swede" Johnson, Texas.  
Howard A. Kester, Tennessee.  
O. H. Whitfield, Missouri.  
Leon Turner, Arkansas.  
J. F. Hynds, Arkansas.  
W. L. Blackstone, Arkansas.  
D. A. Griffin, Arkansas.  
Odie L. Sweeden, Oklahoma.  
L. T. Phillips, Mississippi.

### STFU CONVENTION LISTS PROGRAM

The convention of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, with a membership of more than 30,000, closed its sessions at Muskogee, Oklahoma, after demanding that the United States government take steps to restore "land to the landless" and that it establish agencies for the protection of the rights of farm tenants and sharecroppers. The convention lasted from January 14 to 17.

The hundred and fifty delegates who attended came from six states—Arkansas, Tennessee, Missouri, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Texas. They included in their number Negroes, whites, Mexicans and Indians.

After hearing distinguished speakers such as Gardner Jackson, of the National Committee for Rural and Social Planning, Walter White, of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Prof. Cortez A. M. Ewing and Dr. Morris M. Blair, of the University of Oklahoma, Oliver Peterson of the Workers Education Bureau of the WPA, and others, the delegates drew up their policies.

#### Land Program

They demanded that the government begin a program which would "provide that all actual tillers of the soil be guaranteed possession of the land, either as working farm families or cooperative associations of such farm families, so long as they occupy and use the land."

By resolution, they declared that "since the organization of farmers into cooperatives for the purpose of owning land and tilling the soil together has been found to be the only way of insuring to those who actually work the land the full social value of all they produce, be it resolved that the Convention go on record as favoring the organization of producers' cooperatives." They endorsed the Delta Cooperative Farm at Hillhouse, Miss.

#### Civil Liberties

Other resolutions demanded the protection of the law for union organizers and the maintenance of civil liberties for sharecroppers; the establishment of special bureaus under the various departments of labor instead of the departments of agriculture, to be concerned with the needs of farm workers; the abolition of scrip and commissary stores on plantations; the requirement by law of written contracts between landlord and tenant; and the amendment of the Social Security Act,

(Continued on Page 3)



# UNION PUSHES AHEAD IN OKLAHOMA

By JOHN M. DENNEY

State Chairman, Oklahoma Southern Tenant Farmers' Union

Just about two and a half years ago a small group of less than a dozen bedraggled tenants and sharecroppers—white and colored—under the friendly shade of a towering cottonwood tree down in the heavy cotton district of Arkansas met to discuss ways and means to get out from under the tyranny of their southern planter masters, ruled in turn by an even worse tyrant—King Cotton. There, as by accident, the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union was born. At its third annual convention, held at Muskogee, Oklahoma, in January of this year more than 150 authorized delegates were in attendance, representing six southern states, including Oklahoma. The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union is now firmly established as a national institution and takes its place among the leading farm organizations in the United States.

We believe that this phenomenal growth of the S T F U is due to its timeliness in filling a great need in the economic growth of the country. While the original documents of the Union declare that "our sole purpose in building the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union is to secure better living conditions by decent contracts and higher wages for farm labor and to help build a world wherein there will be no poverty and insecurity for those who are willing to work," and while we remain true to that goal, yet through the activities of the Union the nation has been awakened to the deplorable fact that this tenant system in itself has contributed perhaps more than any one factor to the general distress felt throughout agriculture, particularly in the south, not only as affecting tenants, sharecroppers and farm labor, but land owners as well.

The sun does really shine—in Dixie. But there are clouds, too, and economic storms. Southern cotton growers have, like the feudal lords of the middle ages, clung desperately to production methods closely approximating that of the feudal order, resulting in a form of slavery for southern farm labor in many respects more grueling than that experienced by feudal serfs or chattel slaves. This condition came about largely as a result of machine production in other industry, invading even the cotton country further westward.

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Gradually the conviction is growing that the remedy cannot be realized in any attempt to "remedy" the "evil" of the tenant system, but, on the contrary, the tenant system itself has grown into an evil—an evil that cannot be remedied and therefore must be abolished.

The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union stands ready, eager, to co-operate. We have not proposed, and do not now propose, confiscation of the land. We believe there is a better way, and during the present session of the State Legislature we in Oklahoma are doing our best to aid in the sponsoring of legislation which will enable all tenants who so desire to become home owners, while at the same time removing the land from the deficit side of the landlord's ledger.

To accomplish this end we realize that certain subsidies must be procured, but not necessarily in cash. Credits must be arranged.

Our Union is just as determined that the new land owning class we seek to establish in reasonable security shall not prosper at the expense of under-paid farm labor as it is determined to end farm tenancy as such. We hold fast to the principle that our national prosperity and the security of all classes depends upon the prosperity and security of labor.

### Equal Protection

As a beginning, to this end, we shall offer a bill putting all farm workers under the State Department of Labor. This will give farm labor equal protection with that now enjoyed by industrial labor. We ask public support of this bill.

We shall also insist upon liberal provisions for the establishing of co-operative farms. Individual private ownership and operation of farms has, over a long period of years, proved inadequate security for the farming population. As reliable statistics have it, farm tenancy in the United States steadily increased from 26 per cent in 1880 to 42 per cent in 1930. During the same period farm mortgages increased in almost the same proportion, while in Oklahoma farm tenancy increased from 44 per cent in 1900 to 61 per cent in 1936.

We of the S T F U propose co-operative ownership and operation of large-scale farm projects, choosing lands most adapted to such projects and using modern machinery for the cultivating and gathering of the crops.

There is such a project in operation in central Mississippi, known as the "Delta" Co-operative. Plans are under way speedily to build another such co-operative at Slick, Oklahoma.

These co-operatives, however, are being supported with funds from independent sources, not sufficient to set up the whole population in the business of co-operative farming. It will be one of our immediate undertakings to get public support for such projects for all farmers in Oklahoma who wish to participate.

## Convention Adopts Program Statement

RESOLVED, That the following program for the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union be adopted:

1. Protection in our natural and constitutional right to organize.

2. That farm labor be given representation on all boards of control designed to aid agriculture.

3. Regulation union hours for all rural workers; houses for transient and local rural workers; nine months school for all rural children, with free text books and school buses.

4. Pensions of \$50 a month for all workers over 65, and for all adult workers incapacitated for work, from whatever cause.

5. That the W.P.A. shall be made a permanent institution to provide steady work for all unemployed persons, and that the wages paid shall equal the prevailing union wage.

6. A rental contract with land owners providing that tenants and sharecroppers shall be furnished cash at legal rates of interest to supply their needs while making a crop, with the privilege of buying for their needs and selling their produce where and to whom they may choose; that they shall be paid the prevailing rate of wages for improvements made on the land owners' property; that the property owners shall furnish adequate houses for the families of their tenants and sharecroppers, with a portion of land rent free for the growing of gardens and food stuff, and with free access to woodlands for fuel and grazing lands for pasture.

7. Finally, a co-operative commonwealth, free from the curse of poverty and insecurity.

## SUPER-FLOOD DRIVES THOUSANDS OF UNION MEMBERS FROM HOMES

With 15,000 of its members in the area affected by the super-flood of 1937, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union swung promptly into action by sending flood victims to its locals and co-operating with Red Cross officials in relief work.

Union members proudly wearing their STFU buttons, plunged into the work of strengthening the levees, and contributed toward averting what might have been an even greater catastrophe. Large numbers were compelled to leave their homes because of the high water and take shelter in the refugee camps throughout Arkansas and in Memphis.

In some places, like Edmondson and Louise, Ark., the planters refused to let people move out and kept their household goods, even though they had already moved their mules to higher ground.

Truck drivers from Memphis, who were hired to move sharecroppers' goods, were turned back by riding-bosses and planters at the point of a gun when they attempted to reach the cabins.

Letters from union men throughout Arkansas told of living in their homes while the flood waters crept in.

"We moved our bed upstairs to the small room," wrote one from Trumann, Ark., "and we slept there. The water was eight inches deep in one room and six inches deep in another room. My wife and I had on hip boots. In the kitchen we waded around in eight inches of water and cooked and ate our meals there. We raised our heating stove with bricks and built the fire and floated some chunks to put our feet on."

### In Missouri

The blasting of the New Madrid fuse-plug washed away the homes of scores of Union members around Charleston, Mo., with the result that the Missouri Council of the STFU adopted the following resolution:

"Whereas the United States government on January 26 blasted the levee releasing the Ohio flood-water into the spillway in which we lived and swept away our cabins, taking our household goods and drowning our poultry and livestock and carrying off our farming possessions such as implements, feed and seed,

"Be it resolved that we, the members of the STFU and other refugees, will not attempt to return to the spillway from which we came until the following conditions are met:

"We demand the privilege of raising corn on a 50-50 basis and cotton on a 50-50 basis, that we as sharecroppers be allowed the privilege of owning hogs, cows and poultry, and that we be given sufficient land for truck and gardens free of rent. We demand sanitary houses and outhouses, with screens on doors and windows. We demand adequate cash furnished at a legal rate of interest, with the privilege of trading where we please."

Members of the Delta Co-operative Farm, at Hillhouse, Miss., proved once more that cooperation was the better way of life. When the flood threat came, the women and children were immediately moved to the Rust Cotton Picker plant in Memphis.

## THE UNION BUILDER

A man who stands alone has only the strength of one. But a man who stands together with 30,000 of his brothers has the strength of 30,000. That is the reason for unions.

The stronger our union is, the stronger we are. We must build the Southern Tenant Farmers Union so that we can have the power which comes from greater numbers.

Just as a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, our Union cannot be stronger than the locals which are its links. We must be very careful, therefore, that we keep our local healthy and alive, with all the members standing together as brothers and sisters, fighting for the welfare of all.

To keep your local as a solid unit of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, you must be sure that you attend its meetings. If a local does not meet, it is dead. There is no union unless there are meetings, and there cannot be any meetings unless the members are present.

### A Member's Duty

Your first duty under your obligation as a union member is to attend your meeting. Nothing should keep you away from the company of your brothers and sisters who are making sacrifices for the same things you want—a better life, a chance to live in comfort and decency. When you know that there is to be a meeting, make up your mind that you will be there.

At the meetings, you will find that the members discuss the things that are troubling them. The Union is the place to bring your troubles. If you are trying to find a way out all by yourself, you have only your own thoughts to help you. But if you bring them to the local, you will have the benefit of the thoughts of other folk. Many heads are always better than one.

That is another reason for Unions. They make it possible for one person to get the advice of others.

Our local meetings should be very carefully conducted. They should be interesting and impressive so that the members will want to come back to the next. It is up to every member to see to it that he does his share in making the program of the meeting pleasant and interesting to his Union brothers and sisters.

Do your share for the Union, and the Union will be the greatest blessing to you. By building the Union, we are building our own life.

## READ...

## THE Sharecroppers' Voice

Official Organ  
Southern Tenant Farmers Union

35 cents a year

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# W. L. BLACKSTONE'S REPORT

The following is the text of the minority report of W. L. Blackstone, representing the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union on President Roosevelt's Special Committee on Farm Tenancy:

As representative of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union on the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy I wish that I might unqualifiedly endorse the report of that committee. I speak for our Union in saying that we deeply appreciate the earnestness with which members of the Committee have approached the problem. There is much in the report with which we thoroughly concur, especially the analysis of the problem. Rather than listing our agreement in detail we confine our observations to a few major points on which we disagree with the majority of the Committee. In setting forth these observations we do not believe we can be accused of making undue claims when we state that we workers in the fields, through our unions, through our strikes and through our willingness to stand up against beatings, espionage and all manner of terror in our fight to improve our shamefully depressed conditions have brought the attention of the country to our problems and led to the appointment of the President's Committee. As the specimens now under the microscope (and the presumed beneficiaries) we ought to know better than others what is wrong with us and our situation.

Our first major point of disagreement with the recommendations of the report is its proposal that the Farm Security Administration and the Farm Security Corporation be placed under the Department of Agriculture, with the Secretary and Under-secretary as two members of the proposed board of five. We note with interest and hope recent speeches of Secretary Wallace in which he states that the Department of Agriculture has heretofore throughout its history been concerned primarily with the top third of the farmers in the country and that it must turn its attention to the others from now on. But our experience has been such that we cannot believe the Department of Agriculture will be able in any near future to remove itself from domination by the rich and large land owning class of farmers and their political pressure lobbies. The county agricultural agent, often paid in part by chambers of commerce or the Farm Bureau Federation, is a symbol of such domination. We recall vividly our inability in the days of the AAA to get adequate redress of our grievances as to the disposition of benefit payments and as to dispossessing us from our slight foothold on the land in violation of the cotton contract. Ample evidence of these violations was in the hands of the AAA. Very little was done about it, to say nothing of any genuine attack on the problems of agricultural labor. We consequently strongly urge that the Farm Security Administration and its operating corporation be established as an independent Federal agency and that tenants, sharecroppers and farm workers be given representation on the central board of control.

## DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

As a direct corollary of the above suggestion we urge that a special bureau or division of the Department of Labor be established to bring to bear the investigating, reporting and conciliating services of the Department in the field of agricultural labor, sharecropping and tenancy where the latter falls within a degree of insecurity making the tenant virtually on a par with the wage laborer. Such services by the Department of Labor could and should be of great aid to the proposed Farm Security Administration while it is working out its program. Tenant farmers, croppers and farm workers, shifting back and forth from one class to another—though mostly in the direction of the latter class as the report shows—are very much in the same category as industrial workers who, because they do not possess the tools and equipment essential for industrial enterprise, must work in factories owned by others. And as the Department of Labor represents the industrial worker instead of the Department of Commerce which speaks for business and industry, so the Department of Labor should represent agricultural workers rather than the Department of Agriculture which serves the land owning farmers.

## CONVENTION

(Continued from Page 1)

even though inadequate in its provisions, to include farm workers and sharecroppers.

Telegrams of greeting were received by the convention from William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, John L. Lewis, chairman of the Committee for Industrial Organization, Norman Thomas, former

candidate for President of the United States, Henry A. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, Will W. Alexander, Resettlement Administrator, Senators Gerald P. Nye, Robert F. Wagner, Hugo L. Black and many others.

## TENANCY SHAMEFUL, WALLACE WRITES

Henry A. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, says the American people ought to be ashamed of conditions under which farm



W. L. Blackstone, representative of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union on President Roosevelt's Special Committee on Farm Tenancy. Blackstone (seated at the right) is explaining his position to other members of the Committee.

We believe the report should affirmatively recommend that the Wagner Labor Relations Act be amended to include agricultural labor in its provisions and likewise the Social Security Act. The report as it now stands merely says that serious consideration should be given to such proposed amendments.

Of primary importance do we consider the question of local administration under the proposed Farm Security Administration. But our experience under both the Resettlement Administration and the AAA has proved to us that any program will fail unless the Federal administration exercises strong enough supervision and selects local agents sympathetic enough with its policies to put them into effect. Again and again orders issued in Washington in our behalf have not been carried out. Complaints made by our people to Washington have been turned over to the officials in the field against whom the complaints were made. In numerous instances penalties have thereafter been meted out to the complainants. The county agent, as indicated before, is, generally speaking, the servant of the land owning and business interests from whom he gets a large portion of his pay rather than the servant of the mass of the people in the farming areas. This is particularly true in the south and in the areas where there are large bodies of agricultural labor such as the Pacific Coast with its large fruit and vegetable operations, the best fields of Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska and other beet-growing states, the onion fields of Ohio and elsewhere, the citrus fields of Texas and Florida.

We earnestly believe the report should include, therefore, an unequivocal assurance that strict Federal control of the proposed program will be maintained and that only local agents affirmatively sympathetic to its purposes will be appointed to the end that it may not be rendered futile through the political pressure of the land owning and business interests.

## TENANT REPRESENTATION

Stemming directly from the above suggestion is our recommendation that the section dealing with local boards of arbitration on tenant-landlord relationships be modified. While we welcome the proposal that tenants be represented on these boards—the first time such a proposal has ever been made officially—we feel strongly that the report should specify that representation on these local boards (presumably county) should be in proportion to the numbers of tenants, sharecroppers and agricultural

workers involved as compared with the number of landlords and land owners. That clearly would be in keeping with true democratic processes.

Related to the foregoing recommendations is our contention that the section on civil liberties is not adequate. As those who have been beaten and terrorized (and some of us forced to flee for our lives) in our struggle to pull ourselves up out of our slough of misery we know that a few words from responsible Federal officials on behalf of our constitutional civil rights would have helped in our battles and will help in the ones we know are yet to come. The problem should not be passed over to the states so lightly. We believe firmly, in this connection, that the report should contain a positive statement that the program will be administered without discrimination as to race, religious or political affiliation or organizational membership. As members of a Union which has consistently been discriminated against we have reason to feel deeply the need of such a statement in the report.

While heartily concurring in the objectives of that section of the report advocating continuation of the rehabilitation loan program carried on by the Resettlement Administration we believe that a continuation of the program of grants is also necessary, especially for those of our members who have been washed out by the flood. The fact is that thousands of our members have never received the benefits of the rehabilitation program, partly due to discriminatory action against them, because of their union membership and partly due to the highly selective method of choice of the beneficiaries. The rehabilitation program seems to us the heart of the proposed measures and must be administered on the basis of those who need it most. It will, if thus administered, keep the mass of the agricultural dispossessed going while the other methods are tried out.

## COOPERATIVE ACTIVITIES

In this connection we believe the report's references to cooperative activity are wholly inadequate. They seem only incidental, almost accidental. We believe that in the cotton south the small homestead visioned in many of the present proposals is an economic anachronism, foredoomed to failure. We strongly dissent, therefore, from the "small homestead" philosophy as the solution for the majority of the southern agricultural workers. It is the more readily accepted by the present landlords because they know it to be relatively ineffective and consequently harmless from their point of view. It runs contrary to generations of experience of croppers and farm workers in the south—experience which, we believe, could be capitalized in cooperative effort under enlightened Federal supervision.

While approving the report's recognition of the urgent need of educational and health facilities among the tenants, croppers and agricultural workers we believe that more concrete proposals for immediate action in spreading these facilities could and should be made.

We are naturally strong in our conviction that the report should contain a section endorsing the unionization of these workers in the field as a means of providing an instrumentality through which all the objectives expressed in the report can best be obtained, for through unionization can and will be developed responsible leadership and the ability to pull together for common betterment.

In concluding we cannot refrain from expressing our genuine approval of those sections of the report seeking to prevent the land of the beneficiaries getting into mortgage-holding or other speculative hands, especially the forty-year lease provision—sections which the American Farm Bureau Federation vehemently opposes. The earnestness with which the majority of the committee has approached the land speculation problem and the problem of the price of agricultural commodities is a cause for encouragement. We feel, however, that there should have been a similar amount of thought and study given to the problem of marketing and distribution because we believe the latter is quite as prime a factor in general farm conditions as commodity price and land.

Greetings From

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Greetings From

**Texas City Central  
Labor Union**

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hope for a better living stand-  
ard for years to come.

**KENOSHA TRADES &  
LABOR COUNCIL**

Kenosha, Wis.

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TENANT FARMERS' UNION



*"The Voice of The Disinherited"*  
**The Sharecroppers' Voice**

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 Southern Tenant Farmers' Union

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FEBRUARY, 1937

### THE PRESIDENT'S COMMITTEE

The report of the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy and the President's message to Congress do not say all that should be said. Nevertheless, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union considers it a step forward that the problem of farm tenancy should be placed before public attention.

This step forward would never have been accomplished, however, if it were not for the activity of the Union in demanding justice for the slaves of King Cotton. It was the pressure of the Union that resulted in the appointment of W. L. Blackstone to the Committee, and it was his presence at the meetings that compelled the committeemen to face the real problems involved. Even though the majority of the committee refused to accept all of the proposals of the Union, much of what they decided was due directly to Blackstone's contributions of information on the basis of his own life-long experience.

Our fight for a decent life is not over. No matter what legislation is adopted by Congress and however helpful it might be, sharecroppers and tenants realize that their real protection must come from their own organized strength—the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

The report of the Committee and the President's message to Congress are new victories for the cotton-field workers. There are greater victories yet to be won. They will come in greater and greater number as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union grows stronger and stronger.

### SEVENTY YEARS TOO LATE

"Forty Acres and a Mule" is the dream of the millions of sharecroppers and other farm laborers of the South, states a contemporary of ours, The Southern Farm Leader, organ of the Louisiana Farmers' Union and the remnants of the Sharecroppers Union.

We challenge this statement, on several counts. First, it has been the consistent policy of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and its membership to look ahead, to judge the future by the past. We know that when the Negroes were given their so-called freedom, freedom to starve or find another master, there were serious proposals to re-establish the landless freed men on the small farms by giving them forty acres and a mule. Northern industrialists were ready to give a pseudo-freedom to Negroes in order to create a reserve of labor for exploitation, but they weren't prepared to go so far as to confiscate the land of their late enemies in the Civil War. It might have worked two ways had they begun such a scheme. Northern workers might have decided to take over the factories. As a result, nothing was done.

Once more this same proposal has come up, but it is seventy years too late. We know the history of the small farmer, how today he is almost a thing of the past. Land holdings have been increased. Small farmers are driven to the wall not only in the South, but all over America. Nearly fifty per cent of the land is owned by absentee owners, and nearly all the rest is heavily mortgaged. If we advocated such a proposal we would be trying to turn back the hands of time in an advancing civilization. But the only way out is to find new methods, such as large-scale cooperative farming.

The STFU is an agency whereby the people themselves can find a way. We do not believe that our people, who are conscious of their strength and are fast becoming aware of changing conditions, wish to become peasants tied down to the soil with a bare subsistence. Our people want land, it is true, but we also want more than land, that security of tenure, those good things of life, the necessities as well as the luxuries, that can come from cooperative enterprise. We will not accept half-way measures. We ask of America the right to share in a more abundant life.

### JOIN THE UNION!

SOUTHERN TENANT FARMERS' UNION.  
 Box 5215, Memphis, Tenn.

Please tell me how I can join the Union.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

## TO THE SLAUGHTER



This picture shows sheep being led to the slaughter. Human beings do not allow themselves to be driven like sheep. That is why sharecroppers and tenant farmers are joining the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. If you are not a member yet, fill out the coupon on this page and mail to the national office of the Union.

### HERO OF THE STFU

By John Henry

The STFU would like to put a tombstone

Over Frank Weems' grave,  
 If the planters only would tell us  
 Where he was laid.

The planters and thugs badly  
 beat him  
 And laid him in a store  
 But where he was removed to  
 Is what we'd like to know.

Sheriff Curlin said that Weems  
 In two days he'd produce.  
 But we all know by this time  
 He didn't tell the truth.

Over his disappearance, the STFU  
 And sympathizers have mourned.  
 The thing that grieves us so bad  
 We know not where he is gone.

The STFU cannot help but grieve  
 Over such a hero lost,  
 A man who fought for the right,  
 Regardless of what it cost.

The STFU needs more Weems  
 who for suffering  
 Humanity their lives would give.  
 Frank Weems' body is dead now,  
 Yet forever he will live.

The loss of a real union member  
 Makes all of us feel sad,  
 But anybody dying for a good  
 cause,  
 His death is not really bad.

### DEMAND CIVIL RIGHTS FOR SHARECROPPERS

The Workers Defense League, official defense agency of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, expressed keen disappointment, in a statement issued by Aron S. Gilmartin, executive secretary, at the failure of President Roosevelt to urge action on his Farm Tenancy Committee's references to the violation of civil liberties in the cotton fields of the South.

"Legislation along economic lines is doomed to failure unless the tenant is given the rights and privileges due him as a worker and a human being. Without these rights, the landlord-tenant relationship will remain that of master and slave. It is a bad sign that neither the President nor his committee considered the suggestion of W. L. Blackstone, that the Wagner Labor Relations Act be amended to include within its scope agricultural labor."

## LETTERS

To the Editor:

Congratulations on the convention. Since our delegate has returned back and brought the good news of the good speakers, it has encouraged me and others to press that much harder. We mean to roll the union on, in spite of all.

I was sure sorry that I was unable to be there myself. But I prayed for the success of the meeting and I believe that the Lord heard my prayer and is going to give the victory to the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

I am doing all I can in pleading to men and women to come and join the union because I think there is justice and freedom in the union, what we have never received until present. I have lived forty-nine years of my life under the press of injustice and I do hope that my children will not have to live under it the same as I did.

We have no school-house at all and where there is a school-house it is five miles to six, and no convenient way for them to get there, and it seems hard. For the better-

ment of our condition we are looking to the union.

I am closing, saying from the depth of my heart, press on. For the victory is ours.

W. T. WILLIAMS.  
 Local 122.

To the Editor:

We have lost one of our members, Brother Virge Cooper, who departed this life on December 10, 1936. The funeral was conducted by Rev. O. E. Edwards at St. Mark's Baptist Church.

Brother Cooper left a wife and two daughters, two sisters and one brother and a host of relatives and friends to mourn their loss.

Sleep on, dear brother. It is earth's loss. We hope it is Heaven's gain.

JAMES BECTON,  
 Secretary, Local 111.

### REFUGEE LOCAL

A Refugee Local has been formed in Memphis, consisting mostly of Union members who have been forced to leave Arkansas during the past year.

### NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS WEEK

From March 1 to 7, labor groups and church organizations will celebrate National Sharecroppers Week, with the purpose of educating the American people to the truth about conditions in the cotton fields of the South and of raising funds to help carry on the work of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

Trade unionists all through the country know that they themselves can be the victims of unbearable conditions unless they can help the farm workers of the South to improve their standard of living. They know that industrialists, looking for cheap labor, are taking advantage of the lack of organization in the South to beat down the wage-scales of the North.

Religious groups know that if justice is to be done that sharecroppers and tenant farmers must be organized to win their fair demands. They realize that the plantation system is a wrong done to millions of human beings.

That is why all of these groups are working together in National Sharecroppers Week—for the protection of all labor and for the defense of justice. Men and women who approve of these ideals will take part in the activities that have been arranged by the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the Workers Defense League.